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Feminism, Psychology and the Paradox of Power¹

Power is a word we are all familiar with: we talk about 'will power', 'staying power', 'personal power', 'political power' and the 'powers that be'; the need for checks and balances on power, the responsibilities of power, the abdication of power, the abuse of power, power plays, power games, power dressing; and we know the popular slogans: black power, power to the people, sisterhood is powerful. But what *is* power? Who has it (and how can we tell)? How do we conceptualize and use 'power' as feminists, and as psychologists?

When it comes to answering questions like these, psychology (as usual) arrives late on the scene. Power has been a central concern within other disciplines for a very long time: Aristotle classified political systems according to their internal distribution of power. Machiavelli instructed his prince on how to seize and secure power. Hobbes considered desire for power to be the wellspring of human behaviour. Many philosophers, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists have placed power centre-stage. Bertrand Russell (1938: 9) claims that 'the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics'. According to the sociologist Steven Lukes (1977: 29), 'no social theory merits serious attention that fails to retain an ever present sense of the dialectics of power and structure'.

Approaching the *psychological* literature, it is striking, firstly, how little the concept of 'power' features. As Rachel Perkins (this issue) illustrates in her analysis of clinical psychology, and Erica Burman (also this issue) documents through a discussion of developmental psychology, the discipline as a whole is deeply implicated in the maintenance and reproduction of power relationships which it persistently refuses to make explicit — indeed actively obscures: 'at times, it is as if power were a social obscenity' (Billig et

al., 1988: 147). Secondly, it is striking how naively the concept is typically used when it does feature in psychological research — in the sense that there is no apparent awareness of the theoretical debates current in other disciplines, and ‘power’ is conceptualized in positivist terms as something directly observable and measurable, a property possessed by discrete individuals, an internalized ‘motive’ which can be measured and then correlated with other variables in the hope of psychological enlightenment. For example, in one classic psychological study of power, high scores on the ‘power motive’ were (for men) positively correlated with ownership of sports cars, number of credit cards possessed, and with the likelihood of their illegally removing towels from motel rooms at the end of their stay (Winter, 1973).

But whatever the problems in conceptualizing power within the discipline as a whole, one might expect that *feminist* psychologists would seriously address the issue. Feminism is, after all, a movement devoted to the transformation of unequal power relationships. This paper explores the concept of power as it is used within feminist theory — both within and beyond psychology; it discusses some of the paradoxes of power within feminist thinking and the political implications of our different analyses.

First, the concept of ‘power’ (certainly in the sense of social and political power) is simply absent in much feminist psychology. Often, the word (or its synonyms) is not used at all. Power does not, for example, appear in the index of Mary Roth Walsh’s (1987) *The Psychology of Women* nor in Corinne Squire’s (1989) *Significant Differences: Feminism in Psychology*. Some feminists have pointed out that explicitly political terms tend to be avoided by successful feminist academics: words like ‘patriarchy’, ‘woman-hating’ or ‘oppression’ are eschewed in favour of ‘inequality of opportunity’, ‘prejudice’ or ‘discrimination’ (Taking Liberties Collective, 1989: 138). Looking through much of the feminist psychological literature, it would appear that ‘power’ falls into the same category. Certainly my own experience is that when I use the language of power and politics, and draw on concepts rooted in my understanding of women’s oppression, what I write is labelled ‘polemical’ or ‘political’ — and as being in some sense ‘not real psychology’ (see Kitzinger, 1990a, for a detailed analysis). In other words, one reason for the relative absence of concepts of ‘power’ and ‘powerlessness’ from feminist psychology may be because the norms of academic psychology militate against the use of such overtly political language.

Second, if the notion of ‘power’ is used, it often functions as a rhetorical flourish rather than as an integral part of the research. There is a tradition, in feminist psychology, of ending research and review papers with a caveat about the ‘social and political context of male power’, but most feminist psychological research does not apply an understanding of this context to the research design or data analysis itself. Consequently, concepts of ‘power’ (or ‘patriarchy’ or ‘male supremacy’) too often have only the status of backdrops or props to a psychological discussion and are not explored in their

own right. For example, a chapter in an edited book on feminist psychology ends with these sentences: 'Individual psychological change is not enough. Social change is also required if women's "hysterical misery" is to be converted not only into "common unhappiness", but into the happiness women need, want, and desire' (Sayers, 1986: 37). All well and good — but the entire chapter deals with the problem of individual psychological change for women under headings like 'Repression and Neurosis', 'Introjection and Depression' and 'Projection and Paranoia'. There is a sense of course, in which that is all feminist psychology can do if it is to remain 'psychology'. The (usually) implicit story it commonly tells goes something like this:

Yes, there are social and political features which cause women's unhappiness, but here, in this chapter, this article, this book, we are talking about the personal and individual ways in which women can deal with their misery, and this is not to *deny* structural and political power, but to *choose a different focus* here, because to do otherwise would be to do sociology, or political theory — and we are psychologists, and this individual and personal focus is our particular area of expertise.

Remaining within the disciplinary confines of 'psychology', then, this has to be the story. This means that the concept of (male) 'power' is often used in feminist psychology as a quality which does not have to be explained, but can be invoked as a dustbin term to summarize a state of affairs. Just as some people invoke 'God' and others invoke 'Nature' at the point where their ability to explain the world runs out, so some feminist psychology invokes 'male power' as a pseudo-explanation. For example, another psychology of women text poses, in the last chapter, the question: 'Why has the female always been defined in male terms?', and the author responds to her own question: 'The answer can be expressed in one word: *power*' (Rohrbaugh, 1981, 463). Without further analysis or exploration this statement is, in effect, tautological: by 'power' she *means* the ability of one group (men) to define another group (women) in their own terms. 'Power' is a convenient way of *summarizing* the situation, but fails to *explain* it. The concept, as Latour (1984) points out, is too often used as 'a pliable and empty term . . . a stopgap solution to cover our ignorance'.

In failing adequately to conceptualize and explore the subject of power, feminist psychology, then, reflects *psychology's* failings. But it also, I think, reflects *feminism's*. This leads me to my third point. There is a profound ambivalence about power within feminist theory. On the one hand, feminists have often relied upon a characterization of power as something evil, dangerous and corrupting — a male activity or preoccupation with control and domination which results in violence, rape, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons and the destruction of the planet. 'Power' here clearly carries negative connotations: it is not something any self-respecting feminist would want to get involved with. (In fact, some writers have made the [highly

controversial] suggestion that much feminist behaviour can be interpreted as part of an effort to *avoid* the exercise of power — behaviours like downward mobility, opposition to leadership and insistence on collective working, for example [cf. Hartsock, 1985].) On the other hand, we have said that ‘sisterhood is powerful’, produced feminist books with titles like *Helping Ourselves to Power* (Slipman, 1986), *Womanpower* (Manis, 1984) or *Women of Power* (King, 1989), spoken of women’s power as positive, creative, life-affirming, and stated that feminism is a revolutionary movement intending to use political power to transform society. On the surface it looks as though there is a double standard here: male power bad, female power good.

One way of resolving the apparent paradox is by claiming that power in and of itself is neutral — that it is how you *use* power that matters. (Men have obviously used power for evil ends, and it is an act of faith to claim that women would use it better.) As a discursive move, this conveniently shifts attention away from the concept of power (now implicitly defined as a neutral possession), and the concept itself remains tacit and untheorized.

The danger then is that, in leaving the concept of power relatively untheorized, we run the risk of accepting definitions of power which are directly counter to our interests as feminists: we become victims of the categories provided by patriarchy. The concept of ‘power’ is socially constructed. Anthropological research suggests that there are cultures (Muslim Swahili society is one) in which there is no word for ‘power’, arguing that the concept is part of *our* (white western) representational model and not suited to cross-cultural comparison since it means that ‘we end up asking how do *they* do *our* politics’ (Fardon, 1985: 10). Moreover, its complexities of meaning, even in western discourse, are illustrated by the existence of many centuries of debate as to its proper definition — sufficient that many theorists now accept that ‘power’ (like ‘justice’ or ‘beauty’) is an essentially contested concept — meaning, in other words, not just that there is a diversity of operational definitions of power, but that these conceptual disputes cannot be settled by recourse to ‘the facts’ — that the concept is ineradicably evaluative (Lukes, 1977). What is necessary, then, is not to seek some elusive ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ definition, but rather to locate the different discourses within which power-talk is embedded, to examine the rhetorical functions of different conceptualizations of power, and their sociopolitical implications and effects. In short, we need to deconstruct the different ways in which ‘power’ is understood within psychology and within feminism, and to construct *our own* theories of power and powerlessness in terms which are useful to us as feminists.

This is, in fact, a frequent explanation for the apparent characterization of ‘male power bad’, ‘female power good’ described above. In other words, women (it is said) are eschewing *male* definitions of power and constructing our own alternatives. Male power is bad because male definitions of power

rely on concepts of domination, control and coercion. Female power is good because it is a different kind of power. 'Power is also being redefined. Women often explain with care that we mean power to control our lives but not to dominate others (Steinem, 1983: 156). Lesbian feminist philosopher, Sarah Lucia Hoagland, claims that:

When men consider questions of power, they focus on state authority, police and armed forces, control of economic resources, control of technology and hierarchy and chain of command. . . . 'Power over' is a matter of dominance and subordination, of bending others to our will. . . . It is the power of control . . . (Hoagland, 1988: 114).

Lesbians, she suggests, are developing a different understanding of power, which she calls 'power-from-within': this conceptualization of power represents it as 'a matter of centering and remaining steady in our environment as we choose how we direct our energy. Power-from-within is the power of ability, of choice and engagement. It is creative; and hence it is an affecting and transforming power, but not a controlling power' (Hoagland, 1988: 118). The claim is, then, that there are two competing definitions of power, a 'bad' male one and a 'good' female one.

What are we to make of this claim? One obvious response is to point out that feminists who make this claim are quite simply *wrong* in their version of what men understand by 'power'. Many men (at least, male philosophers and political scientists) do *not* represent 'power' merely as external coercion and dominance, or as located primarily in the police, armed forces, and so on. Bertrand Russell (1938), Noam Chomsky (cf. Kitzinger, 1989a), Stephen Lukes (1974) and Michel Foucault (1980) are amongst the more eminent men who have (in their very different ways) stressed that power is *much* more than this naked, overt, visible power, and have emphasized the pervasive and insidious manifestations of power through propaganda, through ideology and false consciousness, and through the technologies of subjectivity (the media, the mental 'health' industry). Another obvious response is to point out that in *claiming* that women's understanding of power is different from that of men, feminists are repeating (albeit with a different value judgement attached) identical claims made by men from Aristotle through Rousseau to Freud about women's different and (implicitly or explicitly) inferior understandings of political issues like justice, ethics and power. Within psychology, the classic study by David McClelland (1975) analyses male and female fantasies of power and concludes that power is 'conceptualized by men as assertion and aggression, by women as nurturance'. So those feminists who *do* assert that men's and women's concepts of power are quite different are hardly making an original claim. In any event, my interest lies not in addressing the empirical issue of whether or not male and female concepts of power are different (nor in making value judgements about whose is objectively 'best') but rather in asking the

questions: What *are* the implicit definitions of power underlying feminist theorizing and what are their political implications? With what different functions and meanings do feminists (and feminist psychologists) invest the word 'power' — both male power and female power?

Because power is rarely given an explicit definition in feminist theory, in asking these questions it is necessary to read off those definitions from the way in which the word is used in practice. In so doing, I explore the notions of power underlying two, at first sight contradictory, feminist positions: the arguments that women are *powerless*, and the arguments that women are *powerful*.

There is, in much feminist discourse, a repeated evocation of images of female helplessness, victimization and powerlessness. One set of claims central to this approach relies on the observation that women's lives are determined and ordered externally to us: that we are subjected to rape, murder and other forms of male violence, or to the threat of all these. This form of male power has as direct and immediate an impact over the bodies of its subjects as physical force and coercion. Male power is conceptualized as taking things away from women — our lives, our sexual autonomy, our rights over our bodies, our freedom to walk the streets at night. Male power appropriates women: 'men feed on women's stolen energy, dismember our heritage, erase our traditions' (Daly, 1978). This is a form of power which Foucault (1984: 259) labels 'sovereign' power: 'Power in this instance', he says, 'was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself.' It is this kind of power that is exercised against long-term mental patients, especially women, who are not only deprived of their liberty, but also given second-class positions (compared with men) within the mental health services (Perkins, 1991: 131–9).

But rooted in this same understanding of 'sovereign power', a parallel image of *female power* is set against the image of female victimization. Many feminists who have taken this approach argue that 'women have always wielded more power than has been apparent, and aspects of women's lives which appear to be restrictive may actually be enabling' (Greene and Kahn, 1985: 8). Many women feel degraded by and angry about feminist theories which present them only in the role of powerless victim: one writer about her work in the sex industry argues that 'it borders on the criminal for feminists to perpetuate the insulting stereotype of sex workers as degraded victims. . . . Sex work at the extreme represents a courageous choice and the conscious determination of the world's poorest women to survive. The prostitute, then, is a fighter and survivor; to reduce her to a pitiable victim is inexcusable' (Roberts, 1990). 'Where ever there is male power', says Dale Spender (1984: 210), 'there has been female resistance'; and she objects to the term 'phallic power', preferring to substitute the term 'willy waggling', on the grounds that 'a mean and petulant antagonist is easier to deal with than a grand enemy' (Spender, 1984: 210). According to this argument, to

accept oppression as the meaning of our lives as women is to overlook the threat we pose — worse, makes us complicit with the victimizers. Power is not something only men possess, not ‘a property, stamped all the way through like a stick of rock with the definition “men only”’ (Miles, 1985: 81). Women’s powers are ‘the powers of the weak’ (Janeway, 1980) — the exercise of personal agency under oppression. Some historians argue, for example, that the supposed ‘sexual repression’ of Victorian women provided them with a means of control over reproduction and an opportunity for resisting compulsory heterosexuality (e.g. Jeffreys, 1985), and some anthropologists suggest that male fear of menstruation, and women’s retreat to menstrual huts, has been engineered by women for similar purposes (e.g. Kitzinger, S., 1978). Against men’s overt powers are set women’s covert powers, and a celebration of women’s survival and achievement against the odds.

Another, more ‘psychological’ set of claims about female powerlessness relies on the argument that rape, violence and other forms of explicit exclusion, appropriation and coercion are only the most obvious forms of male power. Women are damaged, mutilated, not just physically but also psychologically: our minds, our very selves, are warped by patriarchy. Marge Piercy compares women to bonsai trees, that might have grown eighty feet tall on the side of a mountain, but are carefully pruned to nine inches high:

With living creatures
one must begin very early
to dwarf their growth:
the bound feet,
the crippled brain
the hair in curlers,
the hands you
love to touch.

In this analysis, the monolithic brutality of male power has reduced women almost to the status of non-persons: indeed, Mary Daly (1978) describes women as ‘moronized’, ‘robotized’, ‘the puppets of Papa’ and ‘fembots’. Language like this certainly reinforces the image of female powerlessness: it suggests that women are so indoctrinated, conditioned and brainwashed that we are incapable of taking power even in those areas where we might be offered it.

One definition of power, common in much of the older sociological and philosophical literatures, is power as the freedom to act as you choose (e.g. Nagel, 1975; Russell, 1938: 25). The problem is that if the female self under male domination is riddled through and through with false desires, then women’s ‘choices’ too are constructed under male supremacy. There is a fundamental paradox in insisting on women’s ‘right to choose’ while simultaneously characterizing women’s choices (or a subset of them) as deter-

mined by the internalized dictates of male power (a paradox discussed by, amongst others, Cartledge, 1983; Hoagland, 1988; Kitzinger, 1988). One difficulty with the latter position is that it forecloses the possibility of women acting autonomously (except possibly for a minority of women with raised consciousnesses). As one writer argues, such accounts:

... are implicitly divisive and threatening. They are divisive because they have a tendency to divide women into two camps; those who have and those who have not shaken the dust of patriarchal conditioning from their feet. And they are threatening, because it is offensive and undermining to be told that the life one has led has merely been one of servility, that it has not been of truly 'human' value, that one has been a 'fembot' or a 'puppet' (Grimshaw, 1988: 97).

It is this implicit conception of power, however, that is very common in feminist psychology: and when it surfaces here another difficulty becomes apparent. Because the problem of male power is now located *inside women's heads*, the solution to male power is located there too. Feminist psychologists describe the effects of male power on women's minds — our alleged loss of self-esteem, self-hatred, internalized sexism and homophobia, inferiority complex, fear of success — and then attempt to 'cure' women, (or, to use the preferred language, 'empower' women) from their own position as women who know better. The target of resistance to male power becomes women's minds.

Colette Dowling, author of *The Cinderella Complex*, argues that women suffer from a fear of independence and sit around waiting for a prince to come and rescue them. In constructing her argument, she draws heavily on psychological research into women's alleged 'fear of success' and 'external locus of control', on psychological analyses of women's allegedly 'deferential' and 'helpless' body language and self-deprecating verbal style. Using such research, much of it produced by feminist psychologists (e.g. Judith Bardwick, Janet Hyde, Jean Baker Miller) she describes women as 'vulnerable', 'unsure', 'crippled', 'frightened', 'helpless', 'fearful', 'passive' and 'dependent'. She too was once like this. Then she discovered therapy. She says:

We have only one real shot at 'liberation' and that is to emancipate ourselves from within. *It is the thesis of this book that personal psychological dependency — the deep wish to be taken care of by others — is the chief force holding women down today* (Dowling, 1981: 27, emphasis in original).

And you thought it was patriarchy!

The core problem, as I see it, with this conception of 'power' is *not* just that it is humiliating for women to be described in this way. It *may* indeed feel humiliating, despairing, shocking, to acknowledge the extent and pervasiveness of our oppression. The experience of becoming a feminist is not, necessarily, one of joyous recognition of women's power:

My entry to the women's movement has led to feelings of vulnerability, despair, and shock. That cannot be denied. For identifying with women, instead of men, means taking on, in part, the notion of one's powerlessness, victimisation, and lack of resources. In my own head, for example, I was much less exposed to the danger of rape when I believed that the women who were raped contributed to it in some way, for after all there was no way *I* would provoke or initiate such an attack. Recognising now that *all* women are potentially rape victims, that most rapists are known to their victims, that the object of rape is domination, I no longer have that (false) security that it won't happen to me (Spender, 1984: 211).

As Leah Fritz (1979: 237) has argued, 'feminists eschew false pride. For a slave to be a victim, to *admit* she is a victim, is not ignominious.' (Of course, claiming your *own* victimhood is one thing — labelling other women as victims while believing [openly or secretly] that *you* have escaped or transcended most or all of the 'conditioning' or 'brainwashing' is quite another; cf. Hanish, 1971; Leon, 1978; Price, 1972; all early second-wave feminists who produced searing critiques of 'feminist psychology's' line on 'sex role socialization' and 'conditioning', in part on these grounds.) Nor do I think the central problem with this account of female powerlessness lies, as others (e.g. Grimshaw, 1988: 96) suggest, in its overly monolithic account of male power: in some ways the 'conditioning' line *underestimates* male power, by suggesting that if only women understood they were free, they would be — as though there are no real social penalties and punishments attached to stepping out of line, and methods for enforcing conformity.

I think the core problem with this version of power lies in its conceptualization of authenticity or selfhood for women. If power is seen as imposing 'false' consciousness, inauthentic desires and preferences upon women, then there is a concept of a true authentic inner self, which can spontaneously generate its own actions and free choices, a self that *could be free* of external influences. It is this image of an authentic self that is promoted in a great deal of US psychology which aims to liberate 'the child within' — the free spirit, untouched by social oppression. It is this image that provides feminist psychologists with a discourse of female *power* which is set against the opposing discourse of female powerlessness.

Many feminists represent women's power as arising out of our 'reclaiming' this essential inner self, our authentic womanhood and spiritual creativity — the power within. Power is represented as 'standing for the first time inside the self' (Morgan, 1989: 330); a woman is powerful when she 'enters her own psychic and psychological space . . . beyond patriarchy's midnight' (p. 329). A recent book, *Woman of Power*, was given that title, the author says,

. . . because I feel these women are connected in some way to a spiritual source of inspiration and knowledge. To me, spirit comes through one's

heart and intuition. I believe they have learned to honour their own wisdom and therein lies their power (King, 1989: 2).

'Power' here means 'learning to honour your own wisdom' and being 'connected to a spiritual source of inspiration'. This same book has maxims telling you how *you* too can be 'a woman of power', e.g.:

Follow your compass of joy. . . . Discover your vocation or destiny . . . find your life partners and do the work together in resonance with the evolution of our planet as a whole.

A feminist magazine, called *Woman of Power*, states as its editorial philosophy that:

Our power as women arises from our understanding of interconnectedness: with all people, all forms of life, the earth, and the cycles and seasons of nature and our lives (1987: 1).

'Power', in this formulation, is simply 'an understanding'. This same magazine includes, amongst articles with titles like, 'Reclaiming the Spirit of Life', 'Restoring the Goddess', and 'The Wise Woman Tradition' contributions from Jean Baker Miller (author of the classic *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, 1976), and Laura Brown, a clinical psychologist at the University of Washington. According to Laura Brown:

. . . part of what I do with the people I work with in therapy is to point out to them that they are already powerful in ways that the culture does not define as being powerful (quoted in Malina, 1987).

Power, then, is an awareness, an understanding, a realization *that you already have power*, albeit power that the culture does not recognize.

Browsing through the bookstall at the Association for Women in Psychology (AWP) annual conference in Arizona (March, 1990), I jotted down the following titles: they give a flavour of the task faced by women who want this type of 'power', and make very clear where that power is located: *Journey into Me; The Journey Within; Healing the Child Within; A Gift to Myself; How to Accept Yourself; How to Live Your Own Life*.

Or, instead of resorting to self-help books in your search for power, you can try feminist therapists. (The following quotations are taken from publicity material distributed at the AWP annual conference in Arizona.) How about joining a 'Woman's Healing Circle' where you can 'reclaim the loving power of the Goddess, bloom forth in the eternal dance of cosmic circle's renewal' with Sonia Ganz, PhD, who (after listing her academic qualifications) describes herself as 'Keeper of the flame, weaving Her Golden Net of Great Mystery and Magick in the Global Dance of Women's Healing

Circles': she 'creates ceremonies and rituals, she calls and invokes the Wise Woman Within You' (advertising flier). Sage Freechild, a professional counsellor and bodywork therapist, who specializes in creative visualization and guided meditation, wants to help her clients 'reach a centered place. . . . Through the integration of physical, mental, and spiritual energies, clients are empowered to make clearer choices based on full awareness' (advertising flier). A poster advertising a 'Women in Power' seminar facilitated by a 'spiritual psychologist, healer, and founder of the Inner Light Center of Sedona, who playfully and lovingly assists people in moving from fear into their power and full potential' announces that the seminar will enable participants to:

- Expand Your Limits
- Remove Unconscious Blocks
- Rewrite the Script of Your Life to Recreate a New You
- Learn to Receive Love, Money & Inner Peace
- Understand Unconscious Hopes and Fears Which Govern Your Relationships
- Learn the Truth About Your Personal Laws.

Lest all this sound like the wildest excesses of US individualism run amok, a fringe psychobabble without relevance to feminist psychology overall, let me refer you to the same themes in writings widely read and acclaimed within mainstream feminist psychology, like Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* and Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Gilligan (1982) uses the myth of Persephone, kidnapped and raped by the King of the Underworld, as symbolizing *women's power* (!) and draws heavily on a psychological study by David McClelland (entitled *Power: The Inner Experience*) in claiming (like him) that women experience power through nurturance, care and connection. Belenky and her colleagues open their book with the following statement:

In this book we describe the ways of knowing that women have cultivated and learned to value, ways we have come to believe are powerful but have been neglected and denigrated [*sic*] by the dominant intellectual ethos of our time.

These ways of knowing turn out to be intuitive, subjective, rooted in 'the inner voice', 'the inner expert', 'connected knowing' and involving 'the reclamation of the self'. When feminist psychologists reject positivism, they frequently resort to this type of subjective, internal, semi-mystical alternative.

The problem with this conception of power is that, in turning the spotlight on women's power as residing inside the self, other sources of our power (and powerlessness) are plunged into darkness.

If women are so powerful, then it is your own fault if you got raped, or battered, or if you have not received love, money and inner peace. Louise Hay, author of *You Can Heal Your Life*, makes this explicit in her explanation of how to cure yourself of cancer and AIDS through the power of positive thinking. According to her 'the mental patterns that create AIDS are similar to those that create cancer (deep hurt, resentment, and self-hatred), although it has the added factor of sexual guilt' (cf. King, 1989: 139):

We are each 100 percent responsible for all of our experiences. Every thought we think is creating our future. We create every so-called 'illness' in our body. The point of power is always in the present moment. Everyone suffers from self-hatred and guilt. It's only a thought and a thought can be changed. Self-approval and self-acceptance in the now are the key to positive changes (quoted in King, 1989: 135).

The notion of 'empowerment', which is *much* more common in feminist psychology than the notion of 'power', relies on developing in women this sense of personal agency. It attempts to create in women a certain state of mind (feeling powerful, competent, worthy of esteem, able to make free choices and influence their world) *while leaving the structural conditions unchanged*. One feminist therapist states explicitly that her purpose is to help women to find ways of 'enacting one's wholeness within the context of society as it is' (Heriot, 1985: 27).

Obviously a sense of personal empowerment can sometimes make us feel much better about ourselves than does a passive fatalism about life, but I think we should be concerned about the near-exclusive focus on 'empowerment' in psychology — a catchword applied to a host of therapeutic techniques. 'Empowerment' carries good vibes — is personal, internal, private, subjective experience — but insofar as this represents the extent of psychology's engagement with the concept of 'power', we need, at the very least, to think carefully about its political implications. Drawing upon psychological research allegedly proving that rapists, when shown videos of women in crowds or dangerous situations, tend to pick out the same women as potential victims, a journalist writing in *New Woman* magazine, argues that there is 'a victim look': if you get raped it is your own fault for projecting the wrong image and for having the wrong kind of beliefs about power. Power, she says is internal — a belief in yourself, not something you exert in the world outside — and women who attract rapists lack the proper mental set: 'a victim is someone who feels she doesn't have power' (Morris, 1990). When, as psychologists, we focus on power as an internal individualistic possession, we permit and encourage precisely these kinds of victim-blaming accounts. Jenny Kitzinger (1990) has analysed the political implication of the child sexual abuse prevention programmes that focus on 'empowering' children by telling them they have the right to say 'no': children are told to

'speak up, say no', that 'you're in charge', and taught catchy jingles like 'My body's nobody's body but mine'. Power is seen in individualistic terms as something that can be 'claimed' or 'given away' by a five-year-old. A follow-up study found that, after one prevention programme, children were *more* likely to believe that if they were abused it was their own fault: victimization was seen as evidence of collusion. This is a logical outcome of the messages conveyed in these (and similar) programmes. 'Telling children that they "have" certain rights', she says, 'is not enough. They need some idea of the forces which deny them those rights and ways of fighting back. Powerlessness is *not* "all in the mind"' (Kitzinger, J., 1990).

Interestingly, feminist psychologists recognize this when they write about their *own* experiences of power and powerlessness as psychologists. Such discussions are remarkable for their absence of internal, private, individualized explanations for women's powerlessness: they focus almost exclusively on structural and political constraints. One excellent chapter describes the struggle of women psychologists to achieve representation within the national psychological societies, especially the British Psychological Society (BPS) (Wilkinson, 1990). Not once does the author ascribe women's difficulties in achieving representation to their lack of confidence, external locus of control, learned helplessness, fear of success or need for 'assertiveness training' or 'empowering' therapy. Nor does she suggest that men's power in the BPS is compensated for by women psychologists' superior moral and spiritual power. Instead, she focuses on the organization of disciplinary structures, the dominance of the positivist mode of inquiry, and the patriarchal nature of the BPS. As she recounts, the initial proposal for a Psychology of Women section within the BPS was rejected. Eighteen months later, the second proposal was accepted. How does Sue Wilkinson explain this? Not once does she suggest that in the interim she and her colleagues had removed their unconscious blocs, rewritten the scripts of their lives, and understood the symbolic hopes and personal fears which governed their relationships. Instead, she explains it in terms of having 'learnt a great deal about the procedures and practices of the BPS as an extremely patriarchal, bureaucratic institution', having 'rewritten the proposal using successful section proposals as a model of academic respectability', and sought letters of support from 'big name individuals in the field'. In other words, they learned to play the system.

Feminist psychologists, then, do have access to an explicitly political discourse of power. This discourse is rarely used, however, except when feminist psychologists are writing about their *own* power struggles within the discipline of psychology. And then it becomes, of necessity, a 'socio-political' rather than a 'psychological' analysis (cf. the earlier unpublished version of Sue Wilkinson's paper subtitled '*A Socio-political Analysis of Institutional Constraints on Scholarship and Action*').

Finally, a very different conceptualization of power is emerging from a

minority of feminist psychologists (e.g. Burman, 1990; Kitzinger, 1987; Morawski, 1988; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989) who draw on (even as they criticize) post-structuralist approaches, especially as represented by the work of Foucault. An important feature of Foucault's (1984: 60–1) analysis of power is his observation that power is not simply repressive and prohibitive — something external to the individual which prevents actions and suppresses full human development: rather power is *productive*, that is, produces our very concepts of individuality, of full human development, our knowledge of the world. To take an example from my own work (Kitzinger, 1987, 1989b), patriarchal power does not simply forbid lesbianism and punish lesbians, it also (through sexological and psychological theorizing) constructs and regulates lesbian identities.

The central focus of post-structuralism is on language. Our sense of who we are, and who we can be — our identities and subjectivities — are, according to post-structuralism, constituted by the language we use, through a myriad of 'discursive practices' (practices of talk, text, writing, representation) which position us in the world. The identities and subjectivities we evolve are due not to something intrinsic 'in' us (an essential, true, inner 'female' or 'lesbian' self), but are defined by the categories made available to us in the language we use, and by the meanings and contents ascribed to those categories. Power is implicated in attempts to define these categories and their meanings, to privilege some identities at the expense of others. Hence, power is not simply something which represses and denies individual identity, but rather promotes, cultivates and nurtures (particular types of) identity. Power is not a force which acts on individuals from the outside, at a distance: it is intimately involved in the construction of the individual and her sense of selfhood. Power and knowledge, then, are inextricably connected and 'psychology occupies a key role in the maintenance and regulation of prevailing power relations and gendered arrangements' (Burman, 1990): knowledge is itself a form of politics.

One feature of this conception of power is its inherently unstable expression: it exists not as a monolithic, all-encompassing strategy, but as shifting terrain of professional and everyday discourses. Female experience, the central focus of much feminist analysis, is itself structured by the social relations, knowledge and language of a patriarchal culture. The notion of the free, autonomous, self-fulfilled and authentic woman possessed of a personal power innocent of coercion — an ideal which informs most feminist psychological engagement with the concept of power — is simply an individualist myth which actively obscures the operation of power. When feminist psychologists attempt to foster the development of this kind of 'self' in themselves or in other women (through 'empowerment') instead of challenging the operation of power they participate in it.

The main strengths of this approach for feminist psychologists concerned adequately to conceptualize 'power' lie, I think, in two areas: first, in

emphasizing the role of psychology in reproducing and maintaining existing power relations; and, second, in addressing an explicit *politics* of subjectivity. Together, these two overlapping emphases on the role of disciplinary power in constituting subjective experience, challenge both the feminist psychologist's often trite 'acceptance' and 'validation' of all women's inner experience as the final test of theory and arbiter of truth *and* her arrogant notion that, by virtue of her own raised consciousness, she can 'explain' (away) other women's accounts as rooted in patriarchal conditioning. Insofar as post-structuralism has introduced into feminist psychology some understanding of psychology's own location and operation as a 'technology of subjectivity' and of the extent to which our experience as women and as lesbians is determined and constituted by power, it has been of (albeit limited) value. The central irony is, of course, that varying expressions of these ideas (as well as competing notions about women's 'essential' selves, and parallel discussions about the material effects of male power and female resistance) have been around within grassroots feminism for a very long time, and in a much more accessible and politically relevant form. It is an indictment of 'feminist psychology' that its proponents apparently can avail themselves of these ideas only when presented with them in the form of 'fancy theory' (Morawski, 1988: 184) permeated with the 'strange cult of obscurantism' (Clegg, 1989: 152) that surrounds post-structuralism. There is too the danger that, in drawing on post-structuralism rather than grassroots feminism for an analysis of women's power and powerlessness, 'feminist psychologists' are simply mimicking prestigious male-centred theory in order to secure their own position within manned academia.

But the problems for feminists in drawing on post-structuralism for understandings of power and powerlessness go well beyond the inaccessibility and rampant mystification of the language within which the theory is couched. Post-structuralism embraces a pluralist view of power which militates against the identification of any particular group (e.g. men) as 'powerful'. As Erica Burman points out:

The overall problem concerns the approach's inability to ally itself with any explicit political position; and following from this, a deliberate distancing and 'deconstruction' of any progressive political program. . . . For deconstruction to join forces with feminism and socialism would be to prioritise particular textual readings in a way that is utterly antithetical to its intent (Burman, 1990: 210–11).

Post-structuralism offers a 'legitimate' academic framework within which feminist academics can write with apparent credibility. But in deferring to what Burman (1990: 213) describes as post-structuralism's "'facilitating" mantle', we are made rationally invisible as *feminists*, and our work is appropriated by and 'incorporated' within a male-defined theoretical position. Moreover, in directing our attention to the technology of symbolic

power (representation, discourse, language, the text), post-structuralism turns our attention away from (even when it does not explicitly deny the existence of) the material realities of women's oppression. We cannot stop rape, murder, sexual abuse and oppressive legislation simply by changing symbolic representations of them. Some writers, inspired by post-structuralism's focus on discourse and subjectivity, seem not to realize this, and are now suggesting that 'the notion of power should be abandoned' (Latour, 1984), that we should 'dispense with the term power and begin to talk instead of regulatory practices of the self' (Miller, 1987: 17). To abandon the word 'power', to replace it with euphemisms which disguise the violence of our oppression and the courage of our resistance, is antithetical to feminist politics.

As feminists it is important to address the concept of power and to clarify the meanings we intend by it. Contending concepts are not morally and politically neutral. How we conceptualize power reflects in part what it is we think requires explanation and what we consider a good explanation of it. It affects the questions we can ask about male power, and about female power, and where we are likely to look for the answers. Finally, it behoves us to select our definitions of power with care because the definitions we decide to use reflect and construct our practical strategies — our feminist vision, our feminist politics.

NOTE

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